

Questions of the movement, globalisation and confrontation of cultures pervade both the projects and the biography of Michael Blum, who goes in for a variety of residences and spheres of activity. His projects attempt, with apparent naiveté, to confront the individual dimension with our macro-economic and socio-political systems. In the video *My sneakers*, in which the artist embarks on a search in Indonesia to find where his pair of sneakers came from, by treating them as a vernacular object, and in his installation *400 jaar zonder graf, dan heb je lang gezweven* (400 years without a grave, that's a long time to keep quiet), in which he gives a grave, a voice and bitter feelings to a forgotten explorer, Michael Blum sets off subjective experience against the logic of economics or history. If the aim seems to be the search for an adequate positioning of the individual in this wide world, it remains consciously subordinated to its scheduled failure: its main effect seemingly tiny, the awakening of a form of personal derision. The individual dimension is thus seen to be filled anew with meaning, through the fresh importance which this gesture confers on it.

This practice being largely fuelled by the context, residence seems to be a particularly useful way of going about it. While his earlier work had rather led him to invest urban areas – places like Amsterdam, Cape Town, Mexico City or Vienna – the invitation he received to work in residence in the Moselle region involved a different reality, away from the big cities, in country less bound by international concerns, and where life is still firmly grounded in the continuity of past representations and a set of traditions.

This local base, for Michael Blum, quickly took shape within a key space of the social fabric, in the shape of a "residence" in the pages of the regional daily, and one with a monopoly in these parts. This opportunity afforded him by the local newspaper thus allowed a presence at the heart of a core element of the social life of this community, and the artist's physical presence became somewhat secondary. The principle behind Michael Blum's proposal was straightforward enough: twenty-six issues of the newspaper to include twenty-six short editorial contributions, preferably and for editorial convenience, mostly published at the end of the "news in brief" section, in the column of the "abroad" pages, and now and again on the "sports" or "magazine" page. For each day there would be a corresponding letter, in alphabetical order, and this letter would be the initial of a country. A news clip would be taken from the web edition of some local newspaper from the country in question, and then it would be translated and the wording slightly adjusted for editorial purposes. This principle was adopted after some discussion with the journalist who was our contact person responsible for liaising with the editors. Some modifications had to be made, nota-

bly the choice of featuring the item in the "news in brief" corner of the "abroad" section rather than the desired spread throughout the pages of a daily newspaper, the whole architecture of which is dictated by the logic of geographical proximity, starting with the local pages and moving on to "departmental news" then the "region," "France," and finally "abroad."

The short news items actually published were often snippets having little to do with political issues, small stories one would expect to find in the columns of the local or national pages of geographically distant dailies, here transposed to the international pages of another newspaper. This was obviously a very discrete project being drowned in the mass of information and deliberately included in this mass with no special way of marking it out as different for the reader; assessing how it is going to be received can be done only hypothetically, apart from the odd comment from the public of the art centre, who were in on the project, and the actual journalists directly involved in the initiative. The viewpoint of the editorial team is the subject of a written contribution published at the end of this volume.

So twenty-six issues of the newspaper carried, one after the other, stories on the face of it of no importance to this second area of dissemination, suddenly invested with this extra outreach and inadequate status - the suddenly "international" character of short news items reporting on individual cases clearly went against the rules followed by the paper's editorial staff, who naturally noted the inconsistency of it all.

What place do the mass media usually reserve for this sort of thing? We need to pause for a moment over these mechanisms of the meaningful and the meaningless as they relate to this precise framework of the regional daily press. A chip-pan fire in Trinity-and-Tobago usually has no place in the international columns of a French local newspaper, while, two lines above, the blessing of Prince Charles's remarriage by the Anglican church would seem more legitimate. Of course, we all know who Prince Charles is, but, above and beyond the question of the very existence of this tiny country (never mind where it is!), the Trinity-and-Tobago story raises one important question, namely our general ignorance of one section of the world, which has fallen by the wayside of mainstream History.

This basically is what makes the small news item important. Bourdieu sees its presence as having *"the effect of depoliticising, of its reducing the life of the world to anecdote and gossip."*² Nevertheless, as Gerard Spitéri reminds us, it is *"news for democratic countries. It is banned by totalitarian states, where it does not exist; there is no place for anything relating to the private individual."*³ The small news item has its proper place in a French regional newspaper, but in its allotted section, the incongruity lying therefore rather in the - questionable and questioned - logic of singularity or sensationalism that governs editorial choices.

In his chapter on the press⁴, Marshall McLuhan considers this question of the ordinary. McLuhan frequently refers to the metaphor of the mosaic to describe the structure of a local newspaper, as a juxtaposition of articles reflecting the collective image of a society at work, and used to display the discontinuity, diversity and inconsequence of everyday life. Thus the reader, through a process of association, can build up a picture of this society for himself. When Michael Blum makes room for information viewed as incongruous owing to distance and with no obvious direct effect, alongside other news held to be legitimate for being about some world-famous personality or economic mechanism, he is restoring a place in the reader's imagination for facts or areas held to be of secondary importance. He calls into question not just the actual architecture of the medium he is using, but also an interpretation inherited from a world order of possibly questionable validity. This is what we find with the "abroad" section, thus named as the first sign of a standpoint firmly anchored in a geographical, physical logic, one brought increasingly into question as the newspaper reaches further afield. A national paper would prefer to use a heading like "world," "planet" or "international" for this type of news, even if this involves a degree of confusion. Can a model that tends to view the world in terms of geographical proximity really be still regarded as valid, at a time when moving around is gradually becoming much more important than location, and information is at once a driving force behind globalisation and a product of it?

If the reader is surprised at this juxtaposition – and if the paper's editors have pointed out that these short news items were out of place here, or of no interest – this is precisely because the association created by the play of these juxtapositions produces the image of a different kind of proximity. Michael Blum intervenes in this mosaic of the regional newspaper as if to update it, and opposing to this selection which is the hardcopy version of the newspaper the flood of information pouring in meantime, obviously via the Internet.

These almost totally insignificant short news items, taken at random, appear then like so many tiny fault lines in the structure of the world picture that a community has forged over a period of years, helped in this by a daily press that continues to operate on the basis of a linear logic of representing social and political space – an operation that is certainly necessary to maintain the social bond within a geographical community, but which is hard put to it in light of a radically transformed media situation.

By its discretion, this artistic contribution to the space of the newspaper is in a way the equivalent of a quotation quickly scrawled on a wall in town. It has the status of the individual word, to be grasped rather than memorised. These trivial snippets thus followed one another in the context of a time dimension dominated by the ephemeral and individualisation. They discreetly remind us of the fresh importance we place on the individual following the bankruptcy

of the great Utopias; they also remind us of how complicated it is to take an individual stance on questions of territory, physical geography and scales of values.

This discretion refers directly to the pitfalls of art when it addresses sociopolitical questions; the intervention would have had more of an impact if it had had some plastic materiality, or some echo in an exhibition space, for instance by a daily presentation of the articles in question, thus aimed at a tiny readership already aware of the issues involved. The choice of occupying newspaper space and nothing else, playing to the rules but not the logic behind them, is a riskier position, but one that seems more in keeping with the aims being pursued. Michael Blum takes his place in the public arena without laying claim to any other dimension than the derisory, transparent and questionable dimension of the individual. This is also the often derisory scale of the artistic gesture with a political slant, and it would be pointless to try and assess it in terms of success or failure. We should however hail this opportunity to see this project through, as it required the newspaper staff to make on the face of it such inconsistent editorial choices. The journalists' attempt to rewrite, correct and cut these stories served no real purpose for ultimately it did not really matter how long or short or unusual the articles were. *La dernière brève* is a project that seeks to address, not questions of identity but rather questions of the tensions between the individual and our increasingly normative and global community. It is then about the not so straightforward matter of finding one's place in the world, in one of its public spaces, the place of politics and the life of the community; there to take stock of a person's insignificance against the yardstick of hierarchical logic and universalist categories; and to introduce a degree of disorder, to try and find a new way of getting involved.

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1. An implicit editorial decision, and a choice that led Michael Blum to title his project "La dernière brève" (the last brief news item).
 2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur la télévision*, Liber, 1996, quoted by Gérard Spiléri, *Le journaliste et ses pouvoirs*, PUF essais, 2004, p.184.
 3. Gérard Spiléri, *Le journaliste et ses pouvoirs*, PUF essais, 2004, p.164.
 4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.